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ABSTRACT

Intermarriage is a term applied to a married couple whose religious, racial, or ethnic backgrounds are different. There are three classifications under which an intermarriage can fall: interfaith, interracial, and interethnic. There are two typical patterns of intermarriage. In the first pattern, which has to do with ethnic identity, individuals seek to "fill in the holes" of their own ethnic identities. In the second pattern, which deals with family of origin conflict, the individual marries to solve a family dilemma. Potential areas of difficulty include problems in communication, including nonverbal communication; prejudices and stereotypes; surrounding family; differences in concept of marriage; a language barrier; differences in values; differing cultural objectives for marriage, including sexual relationships, the manner in which children are reared, the division of labor and responsibility, and the nature of love; degree of acculturation; religious differences; and racial differences. Three general goals for counseling intermarried couples have been suggested: keeping open relationships with all family members, which may include reestablishing cutoff relationships; increasing the clients' flexibilities for dealing with the differences of the other's background; and claiming one's own cultural rituals as part of their married identity. In times of stress and conflict abilities to tolerate differences diminish. Such differences which may have once been the attraction then become the sources of problems. (ABL)

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A GENERAL STUDY OF INTERMARRIAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

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A GENERAL STUDY OF INTERMARRIAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

Any time two people get together in marriage, there is a potential for happiness, as well as a potential for conflict. Although it is said that opposites attract, Ahren et. al. (1981) claim that the tendency is for persons to marry others who are similar to themselves and who belong to the same group and race. There are a lot of social, religious, and family pressures which tend to facilitate this type of marriage.

However, there is an increasing trend toward individuals marrying outside of their own groups. This "intermarriage" trend, while still not the norm in the United States, is becoming more frequent. Along with this comes a greater frequency of marital difficulties and divorce, and this has had a great impact on the helping professions. Counselors need to be aware of special difficulties faced by intermarried couples, and the implications they hold for helping such couples.

DEFINITIONS

Intermarriage is defined by Gordon (1964) as the term applied to a married couple whose religious, racial, or ethnic backgrounds are different. There are three classifications under which an intermarriage can fall. Interfaith marriages pertain to those where the partners have been raised with different religious beliefs. Interracial marriages are those in which the spouses belong to different racial groups. Interethnic marriages consist of partners who were reared in differing cultural and/or national environments (Gordon, 1964).

While a difference in any three of these areas- race, ethnicity, or religion- qualifies an intermarriage, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and often an intermarriage will involve more than one of them.

Gordon (1964) also points out that in the United States, interethnic marriages are the most common of the three, while interracial marriages are the least common. These data correspond with a theory described in Spickard (1989), where "social distance" is greater between two people of different religions than between people of different nationalities, and greater still for people of different races (p 8).

The terms intermarriage, intercultural marriage, and out-marriage are often used interchangeably in the literature, and they all refer to the same phenomena. As well, in many cases miscegenation and intermarriage are used synonymously. Throughout the body of this paper the terms interethnic marriage, intercultural marriage, interracial marriage, and intermarriage will all be used in reference to the same idea. While there are distinctions between the meanings of these terms, for the purpose of this paper, the differences will be overlooked, in order to place the major emphasis on the idea of differences. Each of these terms will be used in reference to a couple whose partners are from "different" groups.

THE HISTORY OF INTERMARRIAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

For a country which prides itself on being called the "Melting Pot", the United States has a long history of trying to prohibit

intermarriage in its states. A vast majority of the States have included prohibitive intermarriage legislation in their statutes, and, in fact, only thirteen of the States have never had anti-miscegenation laws (Spickard, 1989). For example, the state of Nevada prohibited any marriage between "a White and Malay, or Brown, or Mongolian, or Yellow" (p 324). This offense carried a jail sentence of between six months and two years.

Even as late as 1966, seventeen of the States still maintained formal prohibitions against interracial marriage (Axelson, 1985). The Civil Rights Movements has been credited for having changed many of the negative attitudes toward intermarriage, but it was the landmark case of Loving vs Virginia, in 1967, that eventually led to the remaining States nullifying their statutes (Spickard, 1989).

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR INTERMARRIAGE

Along with the Civil Rights Movement came a greater acceptance of intermarriage, and a change in some of the attitudes in society. This resulted in an increase of intermarriage, a trend which is still continuing. A study done by Schoen and Thomas (1983) found high and increasing rates of interethnic marriage in all five of the largest ethnic groups in Hawaii. With the increase in the frequency of intermarriage, there has been an increase in the study of its dynamics. A variety of theories have been developed in order to explain this phenomena.

Spickard (1989) lists and describes the various theories which have been developed in an attempt to explain which factors influence the likelihood of the occurrence of an intermarriage:

1. An imbalanced sex ratio- Leading to a high rate of out-marriage by the "surplus" gender of the group (p 345).
2. Generational (assimilation) factors- Indicating that, generally, out-marriage by immigration groups tends to increase with each generation removed from the "Old Country" (p 345).
3. Presence or absence of an ethnic community- Not only the size of the community (availability of partners), but also the relative strength and power of the community (ability to influence choice) (p 362).
4. Increased social acceptance- Due to the lessening of ethnic tensions in the late 1960's and beyond (p 363).
5. The Social Distance Model- Formulated by Emory Bogardus, it claims that race is the hardest line to cross; religion is next; the easiest to cross is national origin (p 363).
6. Social and economic class factors- Intermarriage is more or less common among certain classes. For example, working-class Jews, Blacks, and Japanese-Americans tend to intermarry less frequently (p 363).
7. Gender factors- Relating to the majority or minority group. For example, the idea of hypergamy states that dominant-group males tend to intermarry in an exploitation of subordinate-group women (p 364).

Some of these theories have better theoretic foundation than others, but there is yet to be developed any single theory which

explains of predicts the likelihood of an intermarriage.

PATTERNS OF INTERMARRIAGE

It is interesting to analyze the factors which allow, and lead to, a couple intermarrying, but perhaps it is more useful to think about the dynamics of the marriage itself. McGoldrick and Preto (1984) describe two typical patterns of intermarriage.

The first has to do with ethnic identity. These authors suggest that some of the "individuals who choose to marry out are seeking a rebalance in the characteristics of their own ethnic background" (p 350). In this situation, the individual is trying to "move away from certain values and aspects" of his own ethnic identity which he dislikes by "moving toward others that they admire" about the spouse's ethnicity (p 350-351). In a sense, this is a process of "filling the holes" in one's own ethnic identity.

The second pattern of intermarriage described by McGoldrick and Preto (1984) deals with family of origin conflict. They claim that marrying out may be an attempt to solve a family dilemma, and the one intermarrying may be "attempting to detriangle from an intense emotional relationship" (p 351). In this situation the marriage itself is an escape avenue for the spouse, but as Crester and Leon (1982) suggest, the intermarriage may reflect a higher level of emancipation or differentiation from the family of origin. It seems that the extremity of intermarriage, as opposed to simply marriage itself, allows the triangulated individual more freedom from the situation.

POTENTIAL AREAS OF DIFFICULTY FOR INTERMARRIED COUPLES

Under whichever circumstances intermarried couples get together, and for whatever reasons, it is certain that these couples face a great deal of adjustment within the relationship (Tseng, 1977). The research has shown that intermarried couples face a variety of unique problems, and that interethnic marriages result in a higher proportion of divorces than do intra-ethnic marriages (Ho & Johnson, 1990).

Markoff (1977) has identified several areas of potential difficulty for intermarried couples. This author indicates that many factors interact in generating conflict within any marriage. However, there are other factors which may have special relevance for intercultural marriages. The factors Markoff describes include: Problems in communication; differences in values; differences in the concept of marriage; prejudices and stereotypes; and the surrounding family.

A marriage requires a couple to communicate feelings and thoughts to each other. For intermarried couples this may become difficult if there is a language barrier. This could easily become a source of conflict, but language barriers are not necessarily the most significant problems in communication faced by intermarried couples.

Verbal communication may also result in conflict due to ambiguities and subtleties in vocabulary. In many cases different cultures use the same word to serve different functions. While verbal communication can lead to some difficulties, Markoff (1977)

suggests that they are probably not the most significant. Of greater importance, perhaps, is nonverbal communication. This author states that "the major reason for the importance of nonverbal communication is that it is used to a greater extent to express feelings and emotional responses (p 53). Some cultures may emphasize and recognize nonverbal communication more than others, and this difference may lead to a great deal of conflict.

Cultures differ in their value systems, and it is expected that two ethnically different people will have differing values. Even so, values are less often explicitly stated, but rather "embodied in common social actions" (Markoff, 1977, p 55). Values tend to be attitudes which are displayed through our behavior, and that are not often discussed or even consciously thought about. In this sense, values are unobtrusive, and we generally do not recognize a particular set of values we hold until they are challenged.

Given the complexity of values, it is not difficult to see how these differences can be a source of conflict for the intermarried couple. But, as Markoff (1977) adds, "What makes the area of values so important a source of problems is not merely that cultures differ.., but that all of us tend to feel that our particular culturally ordained values are incontestably 'right' or 'the best'" (p 55).

Just like having different sets of values, each culture has its own definition of marriage, with its unique aims and objectives. As Markoff (1977) puts it, "Each culture develops its

own model for the marital relationship by prescribing uniquely: The nature of the sexual relationship; the manner in which children shall be reared; the division of labor and responsibility; and the nature of love as it applies to marriage" (p 56). In addition, each culture has its own ideas about how and when a spouse is to be selected. When two people from different cultures put all of these differing ideas together, there is quite a potential for conflict.

Another potential source of difficulty Markoff (1977) identifies is prejudice and stereotypes. In this case, the danger is that each partner may view the other "not as an individual, but as the representative of his or her culture or ethnic group" (p 58). This may result in expectations and ideas of each other which may not be accurate or to which the spouse may not be willing to conform.

As well as having to deal with potential difficulties between themselves, an intermarried couple may have to deal with pressures from without. Markoff (1977) explains that many of the difficulties may be mediated through other family members: Parents, grandparents, siblings, children, or others. He goes on to state that the couple themselves, by having the greatest stake in the success in the marriage, and by their close affective ties, may strive more to be understanding and to handle the conflicts carefully. "The interest of other relatives in the success of the marriage may be considerably less..., and they may tend to emphasize the cultural differences which the marital partners try to reduce and compromise" (p 59).

Pressures from without not only applies to the family, but also to the surrounding community. Spickard (1989) echoes this thought, claiming, "Families are usually the first to object, though they are often the first to become reconciled. Ethnic communities usually retain their resentments longer" (p 346).

McGoldrick and Preto (1984) suggest that when stress is added to a system, our tolerance for difference diminishes, and "we become frustrated" (p 360). Stress, then, exaggerates the differences which Markoff (1977) identifies, and tends to create conflict for the intermarried couple.

Adding to Markoff's list of potential problem areas, McGoldrick and Preto (1984) include the factors of: The degree of acculturation; religious differences; racial differences; the sex of each partner, coupled with their ethnic background; familiarity with each other's cultural context; and socioeconomic differences. Ho and Johnson (1990) support this last factor, claiming that group income was a predictor of risk for intermarried couples in their study.

McGoldrick and Preto (1984) go on to indicate that "generally speaking, the greater the cultural differences between the spouses, the more difficulty they will have in understanding each other and adjusting to marriage, and the more difficulty their families will have adjusting to the required changes" (p 348).

COUNSELING FOR INTERMARRIED COUPLE

In the previous pages various potential difficulties for intermarried couples were described. The list of problems is

extensive, and it is widely accepted that difficulties are more likely to occur in intermarriages. It is also accepted that it may take more effort to make an intermarriage work (Hsu, 1977; Markoff, 1977; McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). As mentioned earlier, research also indicates that divorce rates are higher for interethnic than for intra-ethnic marriages (Ho & Johnson, 1990).

Counseling for intermarried couples has received special attention due to these findings, and Monica McGoldrick and Nydia Preto seem to be the leaders in this field. In attending to the special needs of intermarried clients, these authors have given attention to the counseling process in two areas: Premarital counseling and marital counseling.

As part of premarital work, McGoldrick and Preto (1984), in line with their Bowenian orientation, suggest three general goals for counseling: Keeping open relationships with all family members, which may include reestablishing cutoff relationships; increasing the clients' flexibilities for dealing with the differences of the other's background; and claiming one's own cultural rituals as part of their married identity (p 357). H s u (1977), in concentrating on premarital counseling with intermarrying couples, suggests the function of the counseling includes: Assessing the motivation for the relationship; discovering their expectations; finding the realities and helping the couple to see their differences; forewarning them about the difficulties that lie ahead; assessing the personal strength of the couple; and watching for danger signals (p 122).

Both McGoldrick and Preto (1984) and Hsu (1977) agree that it is rare for a couple to seek premarital counseling. Most of the work done with intermarried couples is marital counseling. Again, McGoldrick and Preto have general suggestions which the counselor should keep in mind in dealing with these couples.

First, these authors suggest it is necessary to assess the intermarriage conflicts in relation to how they interact with normal marital life cycle stressors. Hsu (1977) echoes this suggestion when he writes, "The counselor should first assess whether the problem is related to intermarriage" (p 127-128).

McGoldrick and Preto (1984) suggest that another goal of intermarriage counseling should be to help the couple remain open to traditions of both sides while, "maintaining workable boundaries around the nuclear family" (p 358). The opposite, a closed system, tends to isolate the couple and increases the potential for conflict.

Lastly, McGoldrick and Preto (1984) suggest that the counselor help the couple to recognize the "frame of reference" of each others' behavior (p 361). As Hsu (1977) explains, "Sometimes the culturally related behaviors are taken personally and reacted to accordingly, thus creating misunderstandings and conflicts" (p 128).

The goal is for the counselor to help the couple recognize the cultural influences in each other's behavior, allowing them to examine the problem more objectively and less emotionally.

Intermarriage requires a greater degree of flexibility which

is not necessary for those who marry within their own groups. There are certain differences which may never be compromised, and will always exist between intermarried couples. As McGoldrick and Preto (1984) point out, "During courtship a person may be attracted to these differences, but when entrenched in a marital relationship, the same qualities become a rub" (p 357).

In times of stress and conflict our abilities to tolerate differences diminish, and such differences, which may have once been the attraction, then become the sources of problems. The unique difficulties which are potentially faced by intermarried couples require those in the helping professions to be aware of the special needs of these client. As well, as counselors of intermarried couples, we need to learn how to help such couples in the most effective way.

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